



Crescendo of Concern

Americans want their soldiers home; Congress is getting angry about the conduct of the war. It's time for Bush to start being frank about Iraq.

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June 17 - There aren't many sons and daughters of elected officials dying in Iraq. Army helicopter pilot Matthew Lourey might be the first. His mother, Becky Lourey, is a state senator in Minnesota and an outspoken opponent of the war. She and other family members tried to talk Lourey, who at 40 was nearing retirement from the military, out of signing up for a second tour. But even though he had doubts about the war, he felt duty-bound to return to the battlefield.

This is President Bush's legacy. Mothers don't want their children to join the military. Who would have thought that not even four years after 9/11 and the biggest surge of patriotism the country had seen in at least a generation, the military would be having trouble getting people to enlist. By taking the country into a war that we don't know how to win and can't afford to lose, Bush has squandered his second term and made Americans less safe and less economically secure.

Minnesota Rep. Betty McCollum spent Memorial Day with the Lourey family. She voted against going to war with Iraq, and she objected to a provision tucked into Bush's education bill, No Child Left Behind, that allows military recruiters into high schools for the first time. McCollum is no fan of the president, and when the White House called to offer her a seat on Air Force One to accompany Bush to Minnesota for a pep rally on the Medicare prescription drug program, she turned down the invitation. "I could hear my mother's voice saying, don't accept anything from a man you don't really like," she told NEWSWEEK.

Maybe it was the polls this week showing a crescendo of concern about the war. Six in 10 Americans now say some or all of the 140,000 U.S. troops in Iraq should come home. A belated blast of media attention on the so-called Downing Street memo, British minutes of meetings in the summer of 2002 about [intelligence being "fixed" around the idea of regime change in Iraq](#), is raising questions about Bush's credibility at a time when his optimistic pronouncements about Iraq are being tested. Washington insiders knew war was inevitable, but that's not what Bush was telling the country or the Congress, and now that the war isn't going well, members of Congress are angry at having been manipulated.

Whatever the reason for the shift, there's been a precipitous [decline in support on Capitol Hill](#) for the administration's what-me-worry, stay-the-course policy in Iraq. The best the White House can come up with is a promise that Bush will soon start speaking out more about Iraq. What can he say--that Americans should ignore the rising casualties, everything is going well, have patience, stay the course, there is light at the end of the tunnel? Marshall Wittmann, a Texas native and senior fellow with the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, suggests the next time Bush is in Crawford he should drive down I-35 to the LBJ Library and listen to the tapes of conversations between President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara as the Vietnam War raged.

The gap between what the American people saw on their television screens and what they heard from their political leaders back then gave rise to the phrase "credibility gap." Bush is flirting with the same fate. He can't be frank with the American people about Iraq. He may not even be capable of being honest with himself about the way events are unfolding. Comments from commanders in the field undercut on a daily basis the administration's pipedream that an Iraqi army can be trained

and competent to take over the security of the country.

Like the proverbial canaries in a coal mine, two Democrats and two Republicans introduced the first bipartisan resolution calling upon Bush to begin withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq by Oct. 1, 2006. The eclectic group includes Ohio Democrat and former presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich and Walter Jones, the North Carolina Republican dubbed "Mr. Freedom Fries," who has done a complete turnabout since campaigning to rewrite the menus in congressional cafeterias to protest France's opposition to the war.

Reflecting the increasing pressure to challenge Bush but taking a more cautious approach, Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi introduced an amendment to the defense appropriations bill to require the president to report back to Congress the criteria he will use to determine when it is appropriate to bring the troops home, language that pointedly avoids setting a date. Even Democrats who opposed the war can't quite fathom just leaving. This is not Vietnam, a tiny country of no strategic importance. Iraq is at the nexus of terrorism and oil, and allowing it to further devolve into chaos would signal a defeat of enormous consequence. "We have to be realistic about the training of the Iraqis so that when we pull out we do not create a killing field," says McCollum. A procedural vote that would have allowed Pelosi's amendment was voted down along party lines.

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